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ZNR UUUUU ZZH
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FM AMEMBASSY ADDIS ABABA
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 0869
RUCNIAD/IGAD COLLECTIVE

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 ADDIS ABABA 001554

SENSITIVE
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DEPT FOR: DS/IP/AF, DS/IP/ITA, AF/E,

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [CASC](#) [ASEC](#) [ET](#)

SUBJECT: BRUTAL ETHNIC VIOLENCE IN WESTERN ETHIOPIA

¶1. (U) SUMMARY: During the period of May 17 to 21, 2008 the Ethiopian Oromo and Gumaz ethnic groups experienced tensions and conflict prompted by disputes over land rights, which by all accounts, included horrific acts of violence. These events will undoubtedly result in long lasting animosity and problems between these two ethnic groups which have historically never enjoyed a cordial relationship. This ethnic conflict occurred in the vicinity of Nekemte; a city located approximately 150 miles north west of Addis Ababa. The actual location of this violence was in the vicinity of the Dedese River, located approximately 25 miles west of Nekemte. Although the Oromo and Gumaz ethnic groups have a long history of tension and conflict (primarily land based), this most recent incident was reported to be especially violent and brutal. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (U) During the early morning hours of May 17, 2008 a large number of armed members of the ethnic Gumaz group launched an attack against ethnic Oromos in an area located approximately 25 miles west of Nekemte near the Dedese River. The area around the Dedese River is known to be very fertile land with high agricultural value. During the previous communist Dergue regime (1974 to 1991), this area was organized into collective farms. Upon the downfall of the Dergue, the ethnic Oromos claimed this land as their own. The ethnic Gumaz contest the Oromo's claim to this land, and claim the land is theirs. The disagreement regarding which ethnic group should enjoy the rights to this land has resulted in conflict between the Oromo and Gumaz.

¶3. (U) The May 17 Gumaz attack against the Oromos was especially brutal, more so than in previous years. There are reports senior ethnic Gumaz tribal leaders and government officials played a role in encouraging and organizing this attack. The Gumaz attackers were reported to be armed with machetes, spears, bows and arrows, small arms and possibly a rocket propelled grenade. Specific acts of violence perpetrated by the Gumaz assailants against the Oromos are reported to have included amputations of limbs, flaying (skinning people alive), disembowelment of pregnant women and killing of fetuses, emasculations of males and in some cases forcing female family members to consume the severed appendage and killing of small children and infants.

¶4. (U) Throughout the initial two day period (May 17 to 19), Gumaz assailants were reported not to limit their attacks to Oromos, but also attacked members of other ethnic groups as well as civil servants and teachers. The Gumaz were also reported to have fiercely resisted the responding police forces. It is reported that any non-Gumaz individual who was in the area was subject to attack.

¶5. (U) After the initial two days, the Ethiopian Federal and local police restored some degree of order. On May 19 the ethnic Oromo's organized and initiated a two day counter offensive carrying out acts of revenge against the Gumaz. There were reports of Oromo assailants killing Gumaz, burning their dwellings and in some cases burning Gumaz individuals alive locked in their dwellings. By May 21 the Police had restored order and the general security situation was under control.

¶6. (U) The four days of violence are reported to have resulted in approximately 130 persons killed, an unknown number injured, 115 dwellings burned and 8,000 to 10,000 internally displaced persons. Some of these displaced persons are reported to be Gumaz who have fled the area fearing further retaliatory attacks. Many ethnic Oromos have also fled the area fearing further violence. People from both ethnic groups suffered loss of houses, livestock, food stocks, crops, other possessions and are homeless and destitute.

¶7. (U) The conflict is reported to have occurred in four districts of Oromo region, to include Sasiga, Diga, Gumto Gida and Limu. Nekemte was not reported to have experienced any direct consequences of this violence, however did experience some residual acts of violence. Nekemte's primary population is Oromo. There were reports of Nekemte Oromos exacting revenge on any ethnic Gumaz (or similar appearing individuals) they encountered. In some cases Nekemte Oromos organized themselves to stop vehicles seeking to enter town and search for Gumaz individuals. This residual/retaliatory violence is reported to have resulted in the deaths of 2 to 3 individuals and injuries to unknown number of others.

¶8. (U) The local authorities are reported to have arrested and detained 100 instigators of the violence and their accomplices. Most of those arrested are reported to be Gumaz. Among those arrested, are several Gumaz government officials, to include;

-The vice president of the Benishangul Gumaz region;

-The police commissioner for one small district in the Benishangul Gumaz region

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Among those currently being sought by the police for involvement in the violence is an ethnic Gumaz who serves as the head of the Agriculture and Rural Development Bureau for Benishagul Gumaz Region. This individual is accused of being a key organizer who reportedly actively encouraged, motivated and possibly facilitated the Gumaz attack on the Oromos.

¶9. (U) The situation in the effected region is currently reported to be normal and under control. Heavy police and military presence has restored law and order. A peace and reconciliation conference organized by Oromo and Gumaz leaders and the regional head of state is on-going.

¶10. (U) COMMENT: Ethnic tensions are rife throughout Ethiopia. Individual land possession/rights are also a serious matter throughout Ethiopia and the source of much of the ethnic tensions. This latest incident is especially troublesome given the wanton brutality of the acts committed. It is difficult to comprehend how the victims will entirely forgive the perpetrators who committed violent acts against them. Even then, unless the issue regarding the land is fully resolved these two ethnic groups will most likely attack each other in the future. Post will continue to monitor this situation and report developments accordingly. Direct any questions regarding this matter to RSO Addis Ababa Michael Bishop at BishopME@state.gov. END SUMMARY.

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